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Theodore N. Vail Memorial Award Given For Bravery in Bar Harbor Fire of 1947

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Transcript of a sound recording in MS 608, WLBZ Radio Station Records, Bangor, Maine, 1931-1973

Title: Theodore N. Vail Memorial Award given out for bravery in Bar Harbor Fire of 1947

Date: August 25, 1948

Recording number: D:16.26 ; CD: 5 , track 3

Length of recording: 15:11

[transcript begins]

(Music Plays)

Irving Hunter: Ladies and gentleman, this is Irving Hunter, speaking from the main stage of the Bar Harbor Club in Bar Harbor, Maine, where a program is in progress honoring the telephone men and women who provided an outstanding public service during the forest fires of last October. In recognition of their achievements, they will receive a bronze plaque, the only one of its kind awarded in Maine since the inception of the memorial fund in 1920, with the inscription, and I quote, "Awarded to a group of employees of the New England telephone and telegraph company at Mount Desert Island Maine by the National Committee of Awards, Theodore N. Vail Memorial fund, in recognition of their skill, courage, and devotion to duty and performing acts of note worthy public service during the fire of October 1947". Master of ceremonies Willis J. Weeks, Bangor district manager of the telephone companies, is about to open the awards ceremony. The next voice you hear will be that of Mr. Weeks.

Willis J. Weeks: I should like at this time to read a telegram from his excellency the Governor of Maine. "I sincerely regret my inability to join you at Bar Harbor on the occasion of the presentation of the Theodore N. Vail National Memorial Award. The telephone men and women who have worked so faithfully and courageously to maintain critically needed service during the height of the last October fire on Mount Desert Island. In my absence I would appreciate it if you would express to those to be honored by my congratulations and sincere appreciation on behalf of the people of Maine. These employees performed public service in the highest tradition of response to the stress of their fellow men, signed Horace H Hildreth, Governor of the State of Maine."

Willis J. Weeks (Continued): It is a pleasure to present to you at this time Mr. Leon W. Ware of Boston, assistant vice president of the New England Telephone and Telegraph Company and chairman of the company, Theodore N. Vail Memorial Fund Committee. Mr. Ware will speak on the qualifications of the Vail Award. Mr. Ware.

Leon Ware: Hardly a day passes that does not record somewhere in the bell system some act that strikingly illustrates the loyal telephone employees to the people they service. This thought of service first is more than loyalty to an organization as inspiring as that may be. It springs from a sense of individual responsibility to carry out the highest ideals of duty and obligations of public service. It is a devotion that is more inspiring because it affects the millions of people who form the telephone using public and who have built up their social and industrial fabric upon telephone service. In order that fitting recognition of unusual acts of the services of telephone employees be made, The Bell System of 1920 established a Theodore N. Vail memorial award. The Award is named after Theodore N. Vail, who was the first president of both the New England Telephone and Telegraph Company and the American Telephone and Telegraph Company. Because he, more than anyone else, represents the loyalty and fidelity to telephone service, that has characterized the actions of all telephone people since the establishment of The Bell System many years ago. The memorial fund is administered by the American Telephone and Telegraph Company and each year the Vail Medal Committee meets to study cases submitted by telephone companies of unusual acts or services which meets the high ideals established in the Memorial Fund. Awards are made in accordingly without the accord of the excellence of the act or services without regard to geographical location. In each of the 22 associated companies, there is a Vail medal committee, which reviews all cases within its own boundaries for consideration by the national Vail Medal Committee. When the committee of the New England Company met this study the merits of the Bar Harbor case, there was no hesitation on their part in making a unanimous recommendation to the committee of the bell system. Acts requiring courage, initiative, resourcefulness, loyalty and devotion to duty were present in fore measure in the service the telephone people provided in the Bar Harbor fire emergency in October 1947. Tonight therefore, is of the greatest significance because this presentation recognizes the acts of public service that meets the high ideals, which wants the Theodore N. Vail Memorial Award.

Willis J. Weeks: Thank you Mr. Ware. At this time, I would like to introduce one of Bar Harbor's leading citizens. A man whose family has lived on Mount Desert Island since 1770. Prominent in the civic life of the community, he has been outstanding in virtually every activity and hardly needs any introduction from me. For the past 29 years, he has been associated with the National Parks Service. In fact he has been engaged in National Park work since its infection here 29 years ago. I have the honor of presenting Benjamin L. Hadley, superintendent of Acadia National Park. Mr. Hadley.

Benjamin L. Hadley: This is a most significant occasion. It's purpose is to recognize in a suitable manner the will of a group of men and women who render a central service to their fellows in a timed crisis. To whether they may be said in praise or recognition of their services, I consider it high privilege to be permitted to add some little testimony in the heart of the National Park Service. The situation in Acadia National Park, the town of Bar Harbor and on the whole island in October 23, 1947 and during the days immediately following was critical. Hailed in the form of equipment and trained personnel was of paramount need. If the village was to be saved and the park was to retain any of its cheap glory, its forest cover, uninterrupted telephone service between Bar Harbor and distant points was essential to the success of the program to combat the fire. At no time was there the least delay in getting calls through. To me, that was amazing. Knowing as I did the well-known and super difficulties faced the telephone personnel. Field crews and operators had and still have my unbounded admiration for their selfless devotion to duty. Without it, our burden of maintaining a fighting organization would of been increased many times tenfold. There will to serve was also in my opinion, a decisive factor in preventing what otherwise might have been serious panic and perhaps a loss of life. To them I say, well-done, good and faithful service.

Willis J. Weeks: Thank you Mr. Hadley. Our next speaker is a man of national reputation. One who is probably well known outside of Bar Harbor as he is here. During the years 1922 through 1925, he served as President of the University of Maine and from 1925 to 1929, as President of the University of Michigan. In 1929, he was instrumental in the establishment of the Roscoe B. Jackson Memorial Laboratory and has been its director since that time. He has also served as managing director of the American Cancer Society from 1929 to 1945. It gives me a real pleasure to introduce Dr. Clarence Cook Little. Dr. Little.

Clarence Cook Little: There has been a feeling on the part of many people that the small town of Northern New England is populated by individuals who represent a run down and indolent group of descendants of the old rugged pioneer race that settled our shores. I've doubted this opinion because of first hand evidence derived from many years of happy contact with such inhabitation of small New England communities. It required, however, a major catastrophe, like the primitive and awesome force of uncontrolled fire to give such modern New England people the chance to prove that the qualities of courage, faithfulness and devotion to duty were as alive and powerful in them as they were in their ancestors who faced such crisis on the pages of history. In such circumstances, a public service organization like the New England Telephone and Telegraph Company provides an (unintelligible) test. The individual may make errors of judgment or execution, which affects no one but himself. This is not true of a team of workers, whose car is serviced and whose individual errors will reecho in unhappiness and tragedy for those who depend on

them. During the concentrated human suffering and uncertainty of the period of the fire and its immediate after mark, the employees of the New England Telephone and Telegraph Company performed rapidly, effectively, and with contagious confidence, service far beyond their duty. This is a great contribution to faith and simple values, which reflects the undying strength of New England men and women. It is also an impressive and well-deserved tribute to the leadership and directive power of those who, in times of minor problems, built here an organization, which literally at a moments notice, faced and defeated a cruel and unexpected trip to security and to life itself.

Willis J. Weeks: Thank you Dr. Little. We are fortunate in having with us to present the Vail Award tonight, Mr. Erskine M. White of Boston, general manager and vice president of the New England Telephone and Telegraph Company. Here to receive the award and representing the telephone people of Mount Desert Island are A.J. Conti Jr., manager, Minnie M. Allen, chief operator, and Sheldon E. Littlefield, wire chief. Mr. White.

Erskine M. White: I am going to ask the telephone people who are the recipients of this award to rise and I want to talk directly to them. A special bronze plaque and a certificate of award by the National Vail Medal Committee are awarded to you telephone men and women who were working on Mount Desert Island during the fire of October 1947. These are awarded for courage, fortitude, and skill in maintaining essential service in a stricken community. There is no question but of the determination to carry on which was displayed by you telephone men and women on that critical day, measured up to the highest traditions of The Bell System. You participated in the evacuation of men, women and children. You traffic people remained at your switchboard when hundreds of people had left the area. You plant men despite the proximity of the fire did everything possible to maintain service and during and after the fire restored service whenever and wherever possible with the greatest expedition. Your actions were characteristic of the spirit of service that for so long have been exemplified by telephone men and women in times of emergency. Some of you people because you stayed at your job had no knowledge of the safety of your homes and your friends. Your unselfish devotion to duty in faith of the personal sacrifice involved is an outstanding demonstration of the responsibility that telephone men and women feel towards the public they serve. It is an honor and a pleasure to make this award to Mrs. Allen, Mr. Conti and Mr. Littlefield who will receive it for each and every member of the telephone force who worked on Mount Desert Island during that critical period.

(Clapping)

Irving Hunter: Coming to you directly from the Bar Harbor Club in Bar Harbor, Maine. The occasion was a program honoring the telephone men and women who provided an outstanding public service during the forest fire of last October. This is the Maine Broadcasting System.

[transcript ends]

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Fogler Special Collections
5729 Raymond H. Fogler Library
Orono, ME 04469-5729
207.581.1686
spc @ umit.maine.edu